

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS
John Wells Division of Writing
CTWR 505: Creating the Short Film
SPRING 2023
(Two Units, Required, Section #19281D)

Instructor: Craig Sabin
 Class Schedule: Tuesdays 2-4:50
 Class Location: SCI L104
 Office Hours: By appointment.
 Contact Information: rsabin@usc.edu

“Directing students should spend a year making films with their typewriters.”
 – Alfred Hitchcock

GOALS OF THIS COURSE:

- Ideation: To develop your cinematic imagination; you will be honing your skills of **observation** as well as studying how **memory** and **experience** can bring originality and brilliance to your characters and stories (with emphasis on your 507/508 scripts.)
- Character: To strengthen & deepen your ability to conceive characters that will lead to compelling stories.
- Story: To understand what makes good stories and how to craft them for short films.
- Voice: To explore and develop your artistic point of view and original cinematic voice. (*Who are your cinematic heroes and why?*)
- Research: To develop ideas for stories and characters through observation of, research into, and direct experience with real life.
- Visualization: To learn to write from a visual and aural perspective.
- Technique: To understand the structure and *economy* of effective screenwriting.
- Dramatic Scene: To develop a fundamental understanding of the dramatic scene.
- Short Scripts: To learn to write effective and moving short films.
- Rewriting: To understand the importance of revising and rethinking your work.

This is an introductory course in writing for the screen in which you will develop your resources as a storyteller: your memory and observation, your responsiveness to

stories around you, and of course your imagination, your ability to create and develop compelling dramatic characters and cinematic conflict.

We will begin with **visualization**, the concept of telling a story with pictures. You will learn to bring the inner life of your characters to the screen without dialogue by using planting and payoff, action and activity, location, props, costume, atmosphere and motivation. We will discover that it is possible (and indeed necessary) to tell your stories visually, to make them compelling and rich with meaning by using these basic techniques.

Later, we will combine these techniques with dialogue in a second stage of exercises designed to teach you the major building block of cinema – the scene. We will expand our work with character and study the ingredients necessary to make any scene work. By exploring our character’s goals, intentions, or “wants” we will discover that the lifeblood of any scene is **conflict**.

The class will take place in a workshop setting. Together we will read and critique a series of weekly assignments, both non-dialogue and dialogue, designed to help you understand the fundamentals of screenwriting. You will learn to hear your film as you write it, while at the same time, you will discover the importance of character as it is explored through situations of conflict. You will also be learning how to be an active member of a “writer’s room.”

The last six weeks of the semester (Weeks 9 – 15) will be devoted to writing and rewriting the 5 page, CTPR 508 screenplay.

Screenwriting format is not an exact science; within accepted parameters, you should develop a format style that you find both comfortable and expressive. To help you learn format and an expressive, cinematic writing style, I urge you to read as many professional screenplays as possible. You will be required to read and analyze screenplays provided by the instructor. By the third session I expect your assignments to be written in a professional format -- assignments not meeting that standard will be returned unread. I recommend using Final Draft. If you don’t own the software, you can download a free demo version—with watermark—from the Final Draft website (<http://www.finaldraftdownloads/demo-final-draft.phpt.com/d>). You may use this demo version to do all your assignments. **Other software programs are also available for free online.**

READING LIST:

1. *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer’s Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, by David Howard & Edward Mabley
2. *Creative Filmmaking From the Inside Out*, Dannenbaum, Hodge, Mayer (Fireside, 2003)
3. Three feature screenplays or pilots (**required**, provided by instructor)

EVALUATION CRITERIA:

CTWR 505 grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

- Student must demonstrate understanding of the fundamental principles of ideation, visualization, creating compelling characters and writing the scene via the weekly assignments.
- The student must demonstrate an understanding of how to write a short script
- The student must demonstrate the understanding of how to rewrite a scene.
- The student must demonstrate the ability to read and respond to other student's work. Class participation includes full involvement in and contribution to all class discussions, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of the other students and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.
- Class attendance is mandatory, and includes being on time to class (otherwise, the students who present their material first are short-changed).
- You are allowed one unexcused absence (documentation required for excused absences). Beyond one, you will receive a reduction of one-third letter grade for each unexcused absence. (e.g., A- down to B+, B down to B-)
- Tardiness is unprofessional, and so will be considered unacceptable. You will be allowed one unexcused tardiness. After that, you will have your grade lowered by one-sixth of a letter grade for each occurrence. For example: Two tardies = A- to B+. BE ON TIME. IT IS HIGHLY INCONSIDERATE OF YOUR CLASSMATES NOT TO BE.
- Assignments turned in late will be marked down.

GRADING WEIGHTS:

CTWR 505 grades are based on:

- Weekly Assignments.....50%
- Reading and Responding to Workshop Assignments.....20%
- Final 508 Script.....30%

LETTER GRADES:

100-93....A	82-80....B-	69-67.....D+
93-90.....A-	79-77....C+	66-63.....D
89-87.....B+	76-73....C	62-60.....D-
86-83.....B	72-70....C-	0-59.....F

PRESENTATION:

As you are hoping to enter the film industry as professionals, I expect your work to be prepared in a professional manner. Screenplay formatting errors, typos, bad spelling or grammar and overall sloppiness are NOT ACCEPTABLE.

FORMAT: Scripts must be **typed in 12 pt. Courier**

- Name every document you email the group as follows:

Your Name_AssignmentName.Format

Example: Baker_MemoryAssignment.doc, or Baker_MemoryAssignment.pdf

*****Create a TITLE PAGE for each assignment you submit, including title, author name, date and email address.**

****** Put your name, the title and page number on the Header of EACH PAGE of your material. Refer to the SCHEDULE for due dates of specific assignments.**

All work must be delivered to the class Dropbox or Blackboard in PDF format or emailed to group at least 24 hours before class time.

Writing Division Attendance Policy:

This class is a workshop and your participation in the discussion is important. Participation includes full involvement in, and contribution to, class discussion, as well as reading (in advance at times; see schedule) the assignments of your colleagues and offering thoughtful, constructive comments.

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equals one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

Classroom Decorum:

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a sensitive process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is a work-in-progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers.

Internet Policy:

Material discussed in the room is considered private and should not be blogged, tweeted, snapchatted, or posted anywhere else on the internet. Violations are subject to university disciplinary policy.

Laptop Policy:

Laptops may be used in class but only for purposes of classwork. Students should not be surfing during class time unless instructed otherwise by the instructor. Violation of policy could result in laptop privileges being suspended.

CTWR 505 WEEKLY SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE – 1/10 MEMORY

Welcome back! Introductions, Review of the Syllabus. Favorite films? What is narrative? What is the difference between screenwriting and other forms of fiction? The importance of audience engagement, and how to create “tension”. The importance of Goal. “A story is about somebody who wants something badly– but has a hard time getting it.”

In Class Assignment; Trip to School

- List the places you went to school.
- List how you got to each school. Pick the hottest place/trip emotionally.
- List things, places, activities, people, clothes connected with that trip.
- Now describe one trip to the class, tell us how you got to school.

Assignment: Memories

Describe the following memories:

- My favorite toy as a child.
- A secret place I used to go.
- The most frightening person in my childhood.

Describe the specifics of the objects, the person, the place. Feelings and mood they engendered. 1 pg. each. Due 1/14

Read “Juno”

WEEK TWO – 1/17 MEMORY AGAIN

Workshop Memory Exercises. (Group A) Discuss Juno– structure, goal, and conflict. “A story is about somebody who wants something badly– but has a hard time getting it.” The importance of the personal, mixed with wonder. Discussion: Twist, Stretch, Expectations and Surprise.

In Class Assignment; Write/describe a short film story based on one of the four memories we’ve unearthed– school, toy, place, or person. Think of it as a 505 or 507. (1 pg.)

Assignment: Atmosphere exercise.

Pick a cinematic location. In screenplay format, describe the sights and sounds of that location in order to make the audience think something **romantic** is about to take place. The scene ends when your character enters the location. Repeat with the same location, but use the sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **frightening or violent** is going to take place. As before, the scene ends when the same character enters the scene. Repeat a third time using sights and sounds to make the audience expect something **humorous** is about to happen. Note; No action should occur– this is just about creating an evocative location that sets an expectation for the audience. (No action includes non-human action– no fires building, no floods rising.) Just sights, sounds, lighting, and locale to set the mood and expectation.)

These scenes and/or moments are not to be connected into a larger story. Time can pass. (A location that is vibrant and full of life can be run-down and old, for example.) Also, the fear or love or laughs should **not** come from the character's interaction or movement. The goal is to get the audience to expect something will happen based on description of the location. Example: Show the banana peel, but not the person slipping on it.)

½ pg. per scene, 2 pgs. max for all three. Due 1/21

WEEK THREE – 1/24 MEMORY, STORY & ATMOSPHERE

Workshop Atmosphere Exercise (Group B) Format and the function of description and dialogue. Writing visually and efficiently. Plant/Payoff, Preparation/Aftermath and Twist– setting and subverting expectations.

Assignment: Experience.

Choose A or B and write about it;

- A. My moment of greatest pride and my moment of deepest embarrassment.
- B. My moment of greatest joy and my moment of greatest terror.

½ pg. per experience, 1 pg. max. Due 1/28

WEEK FOUR – 1/31 CHARACTER, CONFLICT, AND TRANSFORMATION

Workshop Experience assignment. (Group C)

Read and discuss “Experience” assignment. What’s a Hero anyway? Antagonist (Shadow Protagonist) Motivated Conflict. Character, conflict, transformation. Props and locations as subtext.

Assignment: Preparation for a Date (Significant Event)

In screenplay format, write two short non-dialogue scenes. Pick an interesting character and place them in a location significant to that character. (A home, an office, a combat

bunker.) Show that character preparing for some character-revealing event, such as a crucial job interview, a murder, a confession, an encounter with aliens. Whatever. The point is to show – through props and behavior – not only what the event is, but how the character feels about what's about to happen. (“Somebody wants something badly...”)
This should not be a guessing game. We are not given clues, but glimpses into the character's hopes and fears. It should be crystal clear what the event is when the character leaves the location. Then, ellipse time and show the character's return. **We do not see the primary scene of the event.** But when the character returns to the same location, we should know exactly what happened and how the character feels about it by changes in demeanor, costume, props, etc.

This exercise is designed to build audience engagement and expectation. Introduces the use of props, costume, and character-revealing activity -- but not necessarily dramatic action. This will help you practice time ellipsis, plant/payoff, and/or repetition with a variation. And of course preparation and aftermath. 2 pgs. max, with 1 pg. for the first scene, and ½ pg. for the second. Due 2/4

WEEK FIVE – 2/7 CLARIFYING INTENTION

Workshop Preparation for a Date. (Group A) Audience Engagement, Rooting Interest, Dramatic Irony, and Verbal Irony. Suspense, Subtext.

Assignment: “Non-fiction” Bring in an idea for a 5-minute short documentary about a person, place or process. Create a visual presentation to display. Describe how you would capture and communicate the subject and support this with images. Due 2/11

****WEEK SIX – 2/14 EXPOSITION**

Workshop Non-Fiction presentations. (Group B) Non-fiction characters, world, motivations, political, social and emotional impacts. How do we convey information in film? Dialogue vs. Visual exposition. The power and limits of “Don’t Tell, Show!” How do we convey backgrounds? We’ll do a deep dive into exposition, and watch clips from “Ghost Protocol” “Get Out” and “The Closer”.

Assignment: Wrongest Person/Unexpected Arrival

In screenplay format, write a dialogue scene between two characters. Character A prepares some location for character B's arrival (preparation/aftermath), but character C shows up instead! (Twist! Conflict!) This should be, from what we know of character A and his/her plans, the absolute worst person who could arrive. Character A must get rid of character C before he/she crosses paths with character B! But, character A cannot come out and say exactly why character C must leave. (“Listen mom, you gotta leave because I was about to smoke crack with my favorite girl...”). For this to work, the audience must know what is being planned and the stakes involved. (But this cannot be conveyed via dialogue on the phone, answering machine, texted etc.) Also, character C must be entirely motivated to stay. (Mom is sick and took the day off, for example.)

The scene ends immediately when Character B arrives, whether Character A is successful in getting rid of character C, or not.

Use the techniques we’ve already explored– preparation, plant/pay-off, atmosphere, etc.

This exercise is designed to reveal character through conflict, to build suspense through a ticking clock, and to practice dialogue -- including attitude, vernacular/voice, scene/plot advertising, exposition. 3 - 5 pages. Due 2/18

WEEK SEVEN – 2/21 EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

Workshop “Wrongest Person” scene. (Group C) Putting it all together-- motivated goal, props, tensions, suspense, plant/payoffs, reversals, differentiation. Mining for your theme.

Assignment: Significant Object

A character prepares for a significant encounter and plans to use a certain object. Because of the conflict with a second (or more) character(s) the prop ends up being used in an entirely different way. (Plant/Payoff) (Cheap gift of perfume; a failed apology; the perfume is used as poison, etc; Hitchcock: A leg of lamb for dinner is used as murder weapon.)

The goal of this scene is to build audience’s expectations by using a significant prop. This scene should employ many of the elements practiced so far, including preparation, use of light and sound, manipulating time, motivated opposing characters (conflict!), suspense and surprise, reversal and character change (transformation!). 3-5 pgs. Due 2/25

WEEK EIGHT – 2/28 COMPLEX CHARACTERS, SUBTEXT AND FLAW BEHAVIOR

Workshop Significant Object (Group A) The power of Subtext; When communication is conflict. Complex characters and opposing motivations. We’ll watch clips from “It’s A Wonderful Life” and “The Social Network.”

Assignment: Prepare 4 pitches for your 508 film– two sentences for each. (But be prepared to expand the pitches verbally– everyone will present!) Focus on Character, Goal and Conflict, Motivation and why you like it. Due 3/04

WEEK NINE – 3/7 THE PITCHES!

All students will present their pitches. We’ll be joined by a 508 faculty advisor– strap in!

Assignment: Narrow your options down to two of your pitched ideas. Write a prose synopsis for each story. 1 pg. per story. Due 3/18.

WEEK TEN – 3/14 SPRING BREAK!

Why are you reading this? Go home. Enjoy yourself. Don’t kill too many brain cells.

WEEK ELEVEN – 3/21 GREEN LIGHT!

Final workshop on the last two pitches. We’ll choose one and greenlight you for your 508 script.

Assignment: Create a scene Outline for your 508. Number each scene and describe it in a couple of sentences. Focus on Character, Goal, Conflict, Motivation, Tension and Transformation. 2 pgs. max. Due 3/25

WEEK TWELVE – 3/28 REVISIONS

Workshop Outlines (Group B) How to take notes (and how to give them.) How to strategize your rewrite, focused on character, motivation, raising stakes, tension and

landing your ending and transformation, keeping an eye on structure and script real estate.

Assignment: Revise your 508 Outline. Due 4/01

WEEK THIRTEEN – 4/04 READY?

Workshop Revised Outline. (Group C)

Assignment: Write the first draft of your 508 script. 6 pgs. max. Due 4/08

WEEK FOURTEEN – 4/11 WORKSHOP

Workshop the first draft of your 508 scripts. (Group A) Review Microtechniques, Character Elements, Conflict and Motivation, Transformation and Stakes.

Assignment: Write the second draft of your 508 script. 5 pgs. max. Due 4/15

WEEK FIFTEEN – 4/18 WORKSHOP

Workshop the second draft of your 508 script. (Group B) Taking a closer look at how the script can better deliver the writer's intention.

Assignment: Write the final polish of your 508 script. This is it! Due 4/22

WEEK SIXTEEN – 4/25 WORKSHOP

Workshop the final polish of your 508 script. (Group C) Final Q and A. Writers to watch and read.

Deliver screenplay to 505 class and to 508 faculty.

WEEK SEVENTEEN -- STUDY DAYS. NO CLASSES.

WEEK EIGHTEEN -- FINALS

Write a summary of the films developed in class, including your own. What works about the project? What still needs work? What did the other projects teach you? 1 paragraph per project, 3 pgs. max. Due 5/06

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems

Student Health Counseling Services - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call

engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) | Title IX - (213) 740-5086

equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help a survivor of harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following protected characteristics: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations.

Bias Assessment Response and Support - (213) 740-2421

studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions for appropriate investigation and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

osas.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710

studentaffairs.usc.edu/sssa

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and Inclusion are foundational to the SCA community. We are committed to fostering a welcoming and supportive environment where students of all identities and

backgrounds can flourish. The classroom should be a space for open discussion of ideas and self-expression; however, SCA will not tolerate verbal or written abuse, threats, harassment, intimidation or violence against person or property. If students are concerned about these matters in the classroom setting they are encouraged to contact their SCA Diversity and Inclusion Liaison, <http://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>; e-mail diversity@cinema.usc.edu. You can also report discrimination based on a protected class here <https://equity.usc.edu/harassment-or-discrimination/>

Disruptive Student Behavior

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students' ability to learn and an instructor's ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX